

Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Alton

Elaine Nemsky
Good Shepherd Lutheran School, Collinsville
Teacher: Michael Voss

“To Lincoln the ‘ultimate extinction’ of slavery was a national obligation; to Douglas, the status of slavery was a local responsibility.” These are the words of historian Robert Johannsen. The views of Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln about slavery were brought to the nation’s attention in a series of debates between the two candidates in 1858. The seventh and final debate for U. S. senator between Douglas and Lincoln was held in October 15, 1858, in Alton, Illinois. These debates were an important event in history. The debates focused national attention on Illinois and launched Lincoln into the political spotlight. Like the previous six debates, the main topics of the debate in Alton were slavery and popular sovereignty. Neither of the candidates was for slavery, but Douglas did not feel as strongly that it was morally wrong as did Lincoln. Douglas only thought the popular sovereignty was the fairest way to solve the problem of slave states and free states. Lincoln often referred to a Bible verse: “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” Lincoln believed that either all the states should be free, or they should all be slave; otherwise, he felt the nation could not stay together.

Douglas’ speech focused on what he thought were flaws in Lincoln’s arguments. He strongly disagreed with Lincoln’s interpretations of the Declaration of Independence, especially when it said that all men are created equal. Lincoln thought that it included blacks, but Douglas believed that it was equality only for all white men.

At every one of the debates, Douglas tried to provoke Lincoln by asking the same question, and Lincoln would not answer directly. He asked if Lincoln would vote for the

admission of any more slave states. Douglas contended that if Kansas wanted to come into the Union, the citizens of that state should vote for slave or free. Again, he promoted popular sovereignty. Douglas ended his speech by telling the crowd that in Illinois, they had made the choice of abolishing slavery, and that a black was neither a slave nor a citizen.

Lincoln began by defending himself against everything Douglas had said about him, especially that he had never complained about the Dred Scott decision. He went on to say that Douglas was trying to misrepresent him by telling the crowd that Lincoln thought a black person could become a citizen. When Lincoln started reading his own speech, not commenting on Douglas', he stated that the government would fall if the states were not all free or all slave; he thought the Union would be divided. Of course, his prediction came true in the Civil War.

When Lincoln finished his speech, Douglas presented his rejoinder. Douglas argued against Lincoln's view that the slavery question was the only thing that had ever disturbed the peace and harmony of the Union. Douglas went on to say that the peace of the Union had been disturbed three times, not once: once during the revolutionary war, once on the tariff question, and once on slavery. Douglas made a point that if Lincoln did not want to interfere with slavery where it exists, but wanted to eliminate it, how would he do that? Douglas ended his rejoinder by saying that our country would stay together as long as we abided by the Constitution and obeyed the laws that were passed.

When the election for senator was held, the popular vote was very close. Lincoln won the popular vote 125,430 to 121,609, but Douglas won in the legislature on January

6, 1859, 54 to 46. Some even claim that both of them won because of how close they really were.

Though the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 were a part of Illinois history; they also focused national attention on the issues that were debated, especially slavery. As a result of wide attention, Abraham Lincoln became well known in other states and was able to win the next presidential election. Of course the issues debated in 1858 did not disappear; they forever changed the nation. [Arthur Charles Cole, *The Era of the Civil War, 1848-1870*; Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Lincoln Speeches and Writings 1832-1858*; Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; and Becky Richards, "Lincoln's Changing Views on Slavery," *Illinois History*, February 1997.]